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## Negative Silence: The Unspoken Future of Northern Ireland

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### Abstract

The premise for finding common ground between unionism and nationalism in Northern Ireland in the 1998 Agreement centred on an accepted compromise regarding what the future of the province might be: continued union within the UK was assured but could be changed if unity with the Republic of Ireland was the will of the majority. In this way, Northern Ireland was suspended as if on a see-saw between the 'two traditions'. As a consequence, the very success of power-sharing has made it difficult for parties to articulate a shared vision of Northern Ireland's future.

This paper identifies a 'negative silence' regarding the outlook for Northern Ireland and seeks to uncover some of its implications by analysing three of its constitutive elements. First, how the aspirational discourse of the four largest political parties has remained largely entrenched in oppositional gullies. Second, how the debate around the *Shared Future* framework and *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* programme ironically embodies deep differences in political visions of a 'shared' future for Northern Ireland. Finally, interview-based reflections on how an inability to articulate a future for Northern Ireland affects the young 'Agreement generation' and their (dis)empowerment as citizens. The paper concludes that the thicker the fog of silence grows over the subject of Northern Ireland's future, the bleaker this future is likely to be.

**Key terms:** discourse; Northern Ireland; post-Agreement; power-sharing; silence;

## **Introduction**

At 11 o'clock, on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month of 2011, two minutes' silence were observed in the heart of Belfast, as members of the British Legion, city councillors, bereaved families and passing shoppers gathered around the Cenotaph at City Hall to remember fallen soldiers in wars of the past century. This was a public act of reconciliation as well as remembrance; among the crowd stood representatives of nationalist and republican political parties. The use of silence, drawing upon traditions of mourning and religious reflection,<sup>1</sup> enabled the powerful gesture of shared loss and common resolve to be performed as a collective act. Words would not suffice; indeed, any speech risked underscoring a divide among the group that could only be transcended by participation in the commemorative silence.

At the same time on the same day, political leaders from the four largest parties in Northern Ireland were arriving at Dublin Castle to attend the inauguration ceremony of the new President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins. Their presence was dignified, and remarkable only for the fact that it was barely noted by the gathered media as in any way a landmark occasion. Included among the group was Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness, who had been Sinn Féin's candidate in the presidential election itself. McGuinness' campaign (albeit in an election for which he was not eligible to vote due to being resident across the border) and his working partnership with Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader and First Minister Peter Robinson embodied the 'peace-building' successes lauded by President Higgins in his inaugural speech. In contrast to his predecessors, Higgins did not consider it necessary to make reference to the conflict or to the peace process in this speech; the absence of direct

mention of it was in itself a proclamation of the progress made in north/south relations.

President Higgins' first public duties were to attend a Remembrance Sunday service in St Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral in Dublin, followed by a cross-border journey to attend an all-island school choir competition in [London]Derry. Within the week, Enda Kenny made his first visit to Belfast as Taoiseach and visited the Cenotaph in the company of the Sinn Féin Lord Mayor of the city. Such gestures of 'connection' between north and south, Protestant and Catholic, centred upon the commemoration of soldiers from the island of Ireland who died in service of the British army. The significance of these occasions was primarily symbolic – indicating recognition of shared loss and a common, complex history – but not vocalised.

This – in quiet gestures, without words – is how Northern Ireland's peace process has come to be enacted. It sets a pattern for everyday engagement and creates a space for shared experience. Silence allows the common will to speak more loudly than separate goals. Silence enables reflection in the participant and necessitates it in the onlooker. For such reasons, silence is as important as discourse in embedding, and understanding, peace in Northern Ireland.

### **Positive silence, negative silence**

Language is a characteristic of humanity – it is essential to the creation of society; without communication there can be no community. As Thomas Mann declared, 'speech is civilisation itself'.<sup>2</sup> In light of this, what are the unique qualities of silence and what is their value in a peace process? Just as Galtung speaks of positive peace and negative peace, so we might conceive of positive silence and negative silence.<sup>3</sup> Positive silence creates something

new from the absence of words – as in the shared two minutes’ hush on Remembrance Day. Positive silence speaks when language is insufficient, or when words cannot be found. Dwelling upon this particular quality, Jaworski has described silence as ‘a rich conversational and expressive resource’.<sup>4</sup> It is not merely the absence of sound; it allows us to set aside words in order to communicate in other ways. Silence can be used, as it were, to reach beyond the human condition typically defined by words.<sup>5</sup> Positive silence, therefore, is ‘absence with a function’.<sup>6</sup>

Negative silence, on the other hand, fills space only because there is no shared sentiment that might even begin to create a common discourse. It is not only in a politically-sensitive, post-conflict setting that speech can have an incendiary effect; Luhmann goes so far as to conjecture that, because language is intended to differentiate, ‘A communication does not communicate the world, it divides it’.<sup>7</sup> Negative silence avoids the divisive effects of language without contributing anything in addition; it reproduces the divisive semiotics around a particular subject and represents a failure to agree on either meaning or definition.

Whilst ‘positive silence’ slowly creates the space for shared sentiment and (ultimately) common discourse in Northern Ireland, there is a ‘negative silence’ that threatens to cut through the very foundations of the peace process. This negative silence was, I suggest, actually embedded in the core of the 1998 Agreement, and its ramifications spread widely and endure. The Agreement was the product of multi-party talks that approached the conflict as a problem of competing constitutional claims over the territory of Northern Ireland and oppositional aspirations as to its future. The genius of the Agreement was to simultaneously recognise *and* remove the core demands of the two competing ideologies: unionism and nationalism each came to accept that Northern Ireland would remain within the United

Kingdom until such a time as unity with the Republic of Ireland was the will of the majority. The imaginary opening-up of constitutional possibilities thus freed the political parties to pull their ideological constituencies into compromise, but it also put into suspension any momentum towards defining Northern Ireland's future.

Thus, it is possible to argue that the very success of power-sharing has made it difficult for parties to articulate a shared vision of Northern Ireland's future. This paper identifies a 'negative silence' regarding the outlook for Northern Ireland and seeks to uncover some of its implications by analysing three of its constitutive elements. First, how the aspirational discourse of the four largest political parties has remained largely entrenched in oppositional gullies. Second, how the debate around the *Shared Future* framework and *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* programme ironically embodies deep differences in political visions of a 'shared' future for Northern Ireland. Finally, interview-based reflections on how an inability to articulate a future for Northern Ireland affects the young 'Agreement generation' and their (dis)empowerment as citizens. The paper concludes with an argument for cherishing opportunities for positive silence as a means of slowing eroding the grasp of negative silence over Northern Ireland's future.

### **Political discourse on Northern Ireland's future**

According to the *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* of 2010, 58 per cent of respondents think that the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be for it 'to remain part of the United Kingdom with devolved government'.<sup>8</sup> The same survey found that only 13 per cent of respondents 'would find it almost impossible to accept' a United Ireland if the majority of people in Northern Ireland were to vote for it, with only 2 per cent finding 'it almost impossible to accept' if such an outcome was *never* achieved. In effect, this means that 98 per

cent of people in Northern Ireland are willing to accept, albeit reluctantly in some cases, Northern Ireland's status as a devolved region of the United Kingdom indefinitely, and that 87 per cent accept the will of the majority in Northern Ireland, even if it entails Irish unification in the future. Given this indication of public support for the post-Agreement 'settlement' of Northern Ireland's constitutional status, why does the spectre of the border continue to haunt all political discourse about its future?

There are three related contributing factors. The first is that the long-term future of the United Kingdom itself is in doubt. Even as all politicians in Northern Ireland decided to subscribe to devolution, the very security of the Union has been put into question, not by policymakers in London but by their counterparts in Edinburgh – the very fact of the Scottish National Party's promised referendum on Scotland's membership of the United Kingdom shakes the anchor ropes of Northern Ireland's attachment to Great Britain.<sup>9</sup> The second factor is that Northern Ireland's ongoing transition from conflict makes the discussion topic of its future status subject to what Jay Winter has described as 'strategic silence'.<sup>10</sup> In order to suspend or truncate open conflict about the meaning of the violence, and justification for it, parties have to engage a silence over the topic. Brummett notes that silence 'becomes strategic only when talk is expected... when someone has a pressing reason to speak, but does not'.<sup>11</sup> This is negative silence, but with an additional edge – the difficulty of formulating agreed terms for Northern Ireland's future status is exacerbated by the unwillingness of political and public leaders to take steps towards sketching them out.

In the case of Northern Ireland, this subject of strategic political silence is particularly acute because the question of its constitutional status was approached in the multi-party negotiations as being the core dividing line and source of (conflicting) identity for the parties

concerned. How can parties talk about Northern Ireland's future status when, in effect, the Agreement that brought them together saw them 'agree to disagree' on this fundamental point? This closely relates to the third contributing factor for the negative silence regarding Northern Ireland's future, namely that the main political parties have been almost wholly defined by their competing views as to what this should be. It is notable that parties have become no more equivocal about these differing visions of Northern Ireland's ideal future since the 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement, as is evident in their election manifestos.

### **No manifesto for a future Northern Ireland**

The manifestos of the four main parties in the Westminster Election of 1997, i.e. just prior to the 1998 Agreement, saw each party clearly setting out its position for Northern Ireland's constitutional status as a 'red line' in its negotiating position. For example:

The Ulster Unionist Party remains four square for the Union because the Union offers the best future for all our people, whether unionist, nationalist or neither. It offers everyone the best prospect for peace and fair play because it links us to a genuinely plural, liberal democratic state capable of accommodating social, cultural and religious diversity.<sup>12</sup>

The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) wanted to reassure traditional supporters that integration in the United Kingdom was non-negotiable, but it placed it in new terms that could appeal to centrist voters, i.e. stating that UK membership ensures a connection to a plural, accommodating state without going so far as to suggest that Northern Ireland itself needed to become more diverse or liberal. For its part, the SDLP used the manifesto to directly reject what it termed 'the Unionist principle of majoritarianism' and proposed 'the principle of partnership' as an alternative.<sup>13</sup> As a nationalist party, potential voters were clear that the SDLP's partnership for 'our divided people' would extend beyond the six counties to



encompass an all-island dimension in the ‘better future’ it sought to build in the ‘New Ireland’.<sup>14</sup> Sinn Féin, whose position in the talks was fairly tenuous at the time, used the same oblique idiom for Irish unity (‘new Ireland’) as the SDLP and was equally careful to avoid language of traditional republicanism. Sinn Féin thus described a vote for its party as:

a vote for a renewed Irish peace process. It is also a vote for a new vision of the future – for a new Ireland in which all of us can shape that future. It is a vision for which Sinn Féin activists throughout Ireland are working tirelessly.<sup>15</sup>

In direct contrast to Sinn Féin’s attempt to tie together its pro-negotiating stance with its nationalist credentials, the DUP presented its refusal to enter the multi-party talks as being the best defence of unionism: ‘You can trust us to safeguard Ulster’s future within the United Kingdom. Not for us any back door deals or secret manoeuvring with the Pan-Nationalist front’.<sup>16</sup>

Post-Agreement devolution had barely become enacted before the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive were suspended, in an attempt to break the standoff between the Ulster Unionist Party and Sinn Féin that had arisen over the decommissioning of IRA weapons.<sup>17</sup> In the period that followed (in which the UUP saw its vote share ebb drastically to the DUP and Sinn Féin make dramatic gains at the expense of the SDLP),<sup>18</sup> Sinn Féin continued to emphasise the importance of the peace process for realising the party’s objectives: ‘We engaged in ground-breaking dialogue with Ulster Unionists and, despite current difficulties, this is the key to future political progress and we intend to build on it’.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, the UUP (mindful of the electoral threat posed by the DUP) was uncompromising in its unionist ideology:

We want to build a peaceful, prosperous future, where all can feel at home and take full advantage of the opportunities we have within the United Kingdom. This has always been our goal and Ulster Unionists will persist until it is achieved.<sup>20</sup>

The divergence between the directions in which nationalism and unionism were facing when attempting to ‘move forward’ was all the greater by the time of the 2006 St Andrews Agreement. The agreement between the now-dominant DUP and Sinn Féin centred on finding common ground for the two parties to share power rather than on the future political landscape of Northern Ireland. Manifestos for the first election to the newly-restored Assembly in 2007 thus reflected the ‘two traditions’ as brightly as ever before. The DUP, for example, presented the 2006 Agreement as merely a stepping stone to closer Union:

The achievement of a stable devolved government is but a staging post in our strategy to strengthen Northern Ireland’s place within the United Kingdom and build robust democratic structures which can prevail for future generations.<sup>21</sup>

For its part, Sinn Féin relied on the imbued nationalism of its supporters to be able to reassure them of its indefatigable republican ideals at the same time as urging political progress. It thus sought a mandate to continue ‘constructive engagement with unionism’ whilst seeking, in homage to the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic, to ‘promote a shared future based on equality, “cherishing all of the people equally”’.<sup>22</sup>

At this point, the SDLP and the UUP began to fully assume their uneasy roles as ‘opposition’ to the government in a consociational power-sharing arrangement, using their manifestos to deride the ability of the former hardline parties to create any shared future for Northern Ireland. Thus, the UUP bluntly stated that:

The DUP and Sinn Féin [sic] are more interested in dividing power between themselves rather than sharing office for the benefit of Northern Ireland. The DUP and Sinn Féin are more interested in polarising our society rather than finding ways of uniting us.<sup>23</sup>

Then-SDLP leader Mark Durkan was only a little more subtle, making reference to his party having ‘stood consistently for the Good Friday Agreement’s core principles of a lawful society and an inclusive democracy’ in an attempt to fundamentally distinguish (on moral grounds, even) the SDLP from the new dominant power-holders.

### *Enduring divisions regarding the future Northern Ireland*

For whether some people like it or not, we are in this together, so we either swim together or sink together. There is no point in complaining about certain elements wanting to drag us back to the past if we are constantly proving that we can’t work together on the way to the future.<sup>24</sup>

As I have elaborated elsewhere, the pattern of the SDLP and UUP condemning the predominance of the DUP and Sinn Féin in the governance of Northern Ireland is now well-established.<sup>25</sup> The SDLP’s ‘Your future, our priority’ policy document is a case in point: ‘Rather than create an inclusive Executive and strong cross-departmental decision making’, it bemoans, ‘the DUP and Sinn Féin have been happy to play party-political games with our shared future and create a logjam at the heart of government’.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, such comments go significantly beyond mere sour grapes from the principal architects of the original Agreement, whose support dramatically waned in the wake of its abortive implementation. The above extract from the UUP 2011 manifesto makes a profound point: what future is open to the same people that politicians are attempting to persuade away from the temptations of a return to violence? The UUP’s own suggestion for creating a ‘better, functional future’ was

what it termed a ‘game changing’ proposal (of agreeing the programme for government before allocating ministries) as an alternative to the situation in which the two largest parties carve up Northern Ireland’s Executive powers largely between themselves without having had to agree on core issues.<sup>27</sup>

The reality of the DUP and Sinn Féin’s government not depending on agreement between themselves is predicated in their respective manifestos. Sinn Féin’s 2011 Assembly election manifesto barely made mention of the word ‘future’, but its 2010 manifesto for the Westminster Election followed its by-now familiar pattern of simultaneously reiterating republican principles and a commitment to the Agreement. The mantra of Sinn Féin was summarised in the phrase: ‘The future is unity and equality. The future is Sinn Féin’.<sup>28</sup> Hence, key figures from the party were given prominence in the manifesto. Gerry Adams’ piece explicated direct quotations from the Easter 1916 Proclamation whilst Martin McGuinness described the 2010 election as:

the electorate’s opportunity to endorse the new dispensation and to keep moving forward. This election is about the future direction of Ireland. The work of the peace process has brought Irish unity and national reconciliation closer than ever before. A vote for Sinn Féin is a vote to fulfill that destiny.<sup>29</sup>

Sinn Féin were not the only party to note the importance of ‘moving forward’; the DUP titled their whole 2011 Assembly election manifesto thus. In it, the DUP made an interesting forward-looking claim about preparing Northern Ireland for its ‘second century’, 2021 being the centenary of Northern Ireland’s foundation. Its prescription for the ‘long term stability and durability of Northern Ireland’ was to build ‘the broadest possible support base for it’, but this is immediately followed by a restatement of the DUP’s commitment to ‘strengthen the Union’.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps it is of little surprise that the party with the most open discourse about Northern Ireland's future based on acceptance of its current constitutional status was the centrist Alliance Party. In their 2010 manifesto, David Ford, Alliance Party leader, stated: 'The issue of the border is not at stake in this election, but the quality of life for you and your family, and the future of our society are all on the table'.<sup>31</sup> The inability of the other parties to firmly remove any trace 'the border' from any one of their manifestos since the Agreement reflects their belief that ethno-national ideology remains a critical means of securing votes. Yet, this is not something that can be debated among or between parties – who is going to suggest that a nationalist party formally gives up its goal of Irish unification or that a unionist party publically accede to the likely diminution of the Union? Thus, because the border remains at the heart of political conceptions as to Northern Ireland's future, mutual suspicion and lack of trust imbue the topic – suspicion and mistrust that are consequently addressed only by mutual silence. This negative silence reflects the deadening effect of nationalism/unionism's fundamentalist ideology: of an essentialist identity with a static culture and a fixed end-point. This silence is a consequence of political reluctance to accept that the meeting point between these opposing visions has already been found and is agreeable to virtually everyone.

### **No agreement on a 'shared future'**

In the context of suspended devolution, the Northern Ireland Office launched a consultation document on the topic of 'A Shared Future'; this was later published as a policy and strategic framework for a triennial plan to enact the policy objectives of eliminating 'all forms of prejudice' through the work of various government departments and agencies.<sup>32</sup> The 'vision' for the future of Northern Ireland was defined in the document as:

a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society firmly founded on the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust and the protection and vindication of human rights for all. It will be founded on partnership, equality and mutual respect as a basis of good relationships.<sup>33</sup>

The policy framework was broadly welcomed as the first substantive venture towards initiatives aimed at facilitating change in community relations within Northern Ireland, but it was also criticised for, in effect, replicating rather than replacing ‘ethno-nationalist versions of society’.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, a study of the response to *A Shared Future* found that its ambiguous use of core terms (even that of ‘reconciliation’) was echoed in the divergent interpretations of its objectives.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the biggest disappointment with the *Shared Future* framework, however, was the fact that it seemed to progress much further under direct rule from Westminster than when it was returned to the remit of the Executive. It was not even mentioned in the Programme for Government (2008-2011) that followed the restoration of devolution in 2007.<sup>36</sup> Neither did the Programme mention ‘community relations’, instead offering the following as a ‘cross-cutting theme’:

*A shared and better future for all: equality, fairness, inclusion and the promotion of good relations will be watchwords for all of our policies and programmes across Government.*<sup>37</sup>

To this end, the new Executive put forward the *Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* for consultation in July 2010.<sup>38</sup> If *A Shared Future* had envisaged the creation of a pluralist society, *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* advocated an ‘intercultural’ solution to Northern Ireland’s divisions.<sup>39</sup> This new approach saw the goal of ‘reconciliation’ replaced by the objective of ‘mutual accommodation’ and reflected an assumption of unchanging cultural identities<sup>40</sup> – urging tolerance of other identities rather than change in one’s own. The

programme's style and substance were heavily criticised from most quarters of civil society in Northern Ireland. Many saw it as a regressive move away from even the tentatively progressive ideas of the *Shared Future* framework and blamed this on its parentage, i.e. a product of political deal-making between the DUP and Sinn Féin rather than of genuine will to create an integrated society.<sup>41</sup>

The Assembly election of 2011 saw the topic of Northern Ireland's 'shared future' enter the political arena, but only as a source of contention between the largest parties and their opponents. The UUP and SDLP were keen to present *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* as a DUP/Sinn Féin document, and one that reflected the two parties' failure to agree on even 'the definition of a shared future'.<sup>42</sup> Their criticisms have arguably been borne out by the lack of progress on the matter since. The (post-election) response of the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister to the analysis of the consultation exercise adopted a somewhat defiant tone,<sup>43</sup> and proffered the promise of 'a five-party working group that will seek consensus on issues' in order to translate the programme into a strategy.<sup>44</sup> The projected timetable for this agreed strategy was to be Autumn 2011, with a 'high level action plan' published in December 2011.<sup>45</sup> However, the working group did not meet until late September 2011.<sup>46</sup> A bad-tempered exchange of views, riven with sarcasm and political smear, surrounded the Assembly debate on the subject that arose in response to a question raised by a UUP member of this working group, in which he queried the DUP's commitment to 'redrafting the entire document'.<sup>47</sup> At the time of writing, ten years on from the original launch of *A Shared Future* consultation, there is no sign of further progress on the matter and the programme and its principles are only mentioned in Assembly business on relatively rare occasions.<sup>48</sup> A negative silence has descended over the topic of 'a shared future', and it is all the more heavy because of the rising suspicion that this is being used strategically by powerful leaders. To apply

Brummett's elucidation: the DUP and Sinn Féin have pressing reason to speak on this topic, but they chose not to.<sup>49</sup> The reason for this choice is perhaps because they find themselves in the invidious position of only being able to share power if they share little else – the more they communicate on what needs to be done to tackle the roots of sectarianism and the legacy of the past, the greater their determination to hold peace at whatever cost, and the greater the courage of their leadership, will have to be. Until the parties are confident for peace, the negative silence will endure.

### **No words for the next generation**

One of the most potent criticisms of the *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* programme regarded its negative portrayal of young people in their contribution to Northern Ireland's future society.<sup>50</sup> As one responding group to the consultation stated, 'Young people need to be seen as an asset, not a problem, as an agent of change for our communities.' This final section of the paper considers the inhibiting effects of the negative silence surrounding Northern Ireland's shared future on the potential of this so-called 'Agreement Generation'. As someone privileged to teach sociology to university students in Northern Ireland, I have come to notice that young people here find it incredibly difficult to articulate any sense of what a future Northern Ireland might look like or what role they might play within it. This is more than a reflection of the economic uncertainty which has affected the prospects of employment for today's graduates; it is a very specific indication of the effects of the 'suspended' nature of Northern Ireland's status. The effects of this uncertainty were evident in the discussions of focus group interviews with student groups in Queen's University, one of which is recounted here.<sup>51</sup>



The focus group discussion centred upon semi-structured questions on north/south relations, the debate about the constitutional status of Northern Ireland and how students considered their experience and views of division in Northern Ireland to be different to those of their parents.<sup>52</sup> When asked to summarise the nature of politics in Northern Ireland, one student identifies the problem as being that politicians have an ear, not to the voters, but only to their ideological counterparts:

There is still that strict divide between Catholic and Protestant, with extreme parties. And I know they say they cooperate together but they need to spend more time cooperating together and listening to Northern Ireland as a whole and seeing what people want, instead of just listening to the other side. And they need to implement policies, first listen to everyone and find out what the people of Northern Ireland want, so they can move on and take away the religious hold on it all.<sup>53</sup>

It is interesting to note that the student presents the political parties as Catholic and Protestant (rather than unionist and nationalist) and that she disbelieves party discourse about their cooperation. She emphasises the need for the parties to listen to the views of voters as a means of moving politics away from the sectarian quagmire. In relation to this, another student postulates that, 'when it comes down to it ... people's views are the same'. She argues that people on 'both sides' want 'the same thing' in relation to housing, health and education. At the same time, she acknowledges the existence of ongoing issues, such as policing and parades, 'where they don't agree and they don't want the same things and it's going to be hard'. Such issues, she admits, 'need to be worked on most'. Thus, immediately, the young people feel compelled into relying on the politicians' willingness and ability to work together. Perhaps not uniquely to Northern Ireland, students view politicians currently in power as being 'bitter and stuck', and unlikely to find agreement on difficult topics ('It's nearly a miracle if they do sit and talk about small things'). But they are very positive about the

ameliorating effects of time and about the new generation of politicians, whom they seeing as likely to benefit from ‘more opportunity for cooperation’.

The views of the students about the positive potential of the younger generation also highlights their impression of the negative effects that the conflict had on the generation of their parents and grandparents. For example, when asked about the goal of a united Ireland, the students responded:

a lot of people growing up now can't be bothered with it. They are nearly fed up hearing about it. No one cares anymore. ... if it comes at the cost of peace no one wants it.

One student uses the phrase ‘people here now know’ a few times to indicate a qualitative difference between the young generation and older generations:

now you've hindsight and you can see the devastation it did cause, whereas before ... you didn't really know. But now you know and nobody wants to go back to times like that. With hindsight you know it's not worth the cost.

The young generation would like to consider themselves to be in a different place, metaphorically and even politically, to their forebears; this gives them the benefit of insights into the cost of conflict – and its futility – that was not open to their parents.

However, what is particularly interesting for our analysis of the significance of negative silence in Northern Ireland is that, although our young respondents were absolutely sure that their generation thinks about the constitutional question differently, they still considered it a subject that simply cannot be discussed openly.

it's ok to talk about other things, but [the constitutional question] is just one of those things you're not allowed talk about ... Because that is what people were fighting for

and maybe there is a fear if you bring it up it could bring up old bad stuff. And we've moved away from that in some ways but it's still there, and maybe that is why these relationships need to be forged. But nobody wants it to be brought up.

This student has exactly pinpointed the problem faced by Northern Ireland's politicians: the fundamental division is still there and it needs to be crossed, but there is a wariness of even mentioning the topic for fear of making the gap all the more apparent.

Like, imagine going into Stormont and bringing that [topic of Irish unification] up! Everyone would just start killing one another all over again! (Laughter) They just talk differently and about different issues now.

This puts into a slightly different light our first student's assertion that politicians need to talk more about fundamental issues such as housing and education, given that it indicates that the need to discuss these topics is made all the more urgent by the deep fear (even among the younger generation) of discussing subjects of disagreement. Unfortunately, the question of what Northern Ireland's future should be dominates this category of unmentionable topics.

This makes the legacy of conflict very real – and lasting – even for a generation who have grown up in the peace process. As one student comments, 'I think there is always an element of it [the conflict] being passed down, and people being told stories about it. I think it's always going to be there'. Thus, when the focus group were prompted to suggest 'alternative' ideas for Northern Ireland's future, the students struggle to answer – reflecting the years of silence on the matter:

Q: And how do you break [the wariness of talking about the future] down?

S3: I have no idea.

S1: I really don't know.

Another student elaborates on why such shared thinking about the future is difficult:

one side wants a united Ireland and the other doesn't, so both sides are suspicious about what the other wants and is doing. And it's hard to break down that distrust, because ... if you strip it right back, they both want different things, so it's so hard to find a solution.

Even this optimistic generation, so keen to think of themselves as free from the prejudices of the past, find it impossible to get beyond the belief that 'both sides' want 'different things'. Nevertheless, what perhaps offers the greatest potential for shared future for Northern Ireland is the fact that the young people themselves are 'definitely' hopeful for what their generation can do and that, among our small group of respondents, all planned to remain in Northern Ireland ('Leave Northern Ireland?! I can't see me leaving.').<sup>54</sup>

## **Conclusion**

What will be the ideal Northern Ireland to which these young people can contribute? This simple question remains too controversial for the majority of Northern Ireland's politicians to answer. It is not that a shared discourse is necessary in order to have a shared future, but we do need to be able to talk about that future freely and confidently in order to look forward to it. Somewhat unusually, I will centre my concluding remarks upon a quotation from a party manifesto from 2011 (*whose* manifesto is insignificant, as its criticism can apply equally across political and ideological divides in contemporary Northern Ireland):

How can they talk about Northern Ireland 'moving on' when they themselves are so often stuck in a rut, guided by signposts which point to the past rather than the future?<sup>55</sup>

This paper has revealed that the rhetorical question posed here is best answered: 'they cannot'. Not only can politicians not adequately talk about Northern Ireland's future, their

failure to do so makes it difficult even for the next generation, young people who have not known violent conflict, to do so.

This paper began with reflections on examples of the use of positive silence in contemporary Northern Ireland: silence to create a space for shared reflection and side-by-side gestures of commonality, if not solidarity. In a situation in which the divisive effects of language are all too evident, perhaps only the creation of more opportunities for positive silence can contribute to the gradual erosion of fear and suspicion that currently allow negative silence to prevail over the subject of Northern Ireland's shared future.

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## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> Durkheim (after Henry Hubert and Marcel Mauss) observed that silence (as the ritual abstinence from the profanity of speech) is one means of introducing an individual to the sacred world. See Emile Durkheim (trans. Carol Cosman), *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1912]) 230.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Mann cited in Cheryl Glenn, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004) 3.

<sup>3</sup> 'Thus, there are two aspects of peace as conceived here: *negative peace* which is the absence of violence, the absence of war – and *positive peace* which is the integration of human society'. Johann Galtung 'An Editorial', *Journal of Peace Research* 1.1 (1964): 2.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Jaworski, 'Introduction: An overview', *Silence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Adam Jaworski (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and co., 1997) 10.

<sup>5</sup> Sogyal Rinpoche cited in Maria-Luisa Achino-Loeb 'Silence as the currency of power', *Silence: The Currency of Power*, Ed. Maria-Luisa Achino-Loeb (Oxford: Berghahn, 2006) 1.

<sup>6</sup> Glenn, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Niklas Luhmann (trans. Kirstin Behnke) 'Speaking and Silence', *New German Critique* 61(1994): 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* (Belfast: ARK, 2010), web, 18 November 2011, <[http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2010/Political\\_Attitudes/index.html](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2010/Political_Attitudes/index.html)>.

<sup>9</sup> I owe this insight to Duncan Morrow, from comments made at the 'Colloquium on Loyalism' organised by the Institute for British-Irish Studies (UCD) and hosted by the Ulster Museum, 5 October 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Jay Winter, 'Thinking about silence', *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Efrat Ben-Ze'ev, Ruth Ginio and Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 5.

<sup>11</sup> Barry Brummett, 'Towards a theory of silence as a political strategy', *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 66. 3 (1980): 289.

<sup>12</sup> Ulster Unionist Party, *Westminster Election Manifesto* (1997) 1.

<sup>13</sup> Social Democratic and Labour Party, *Westminster Election Manifesto* (1997) 1.

<sup>14</sup> SDLP (1997) 1, 15, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Sinn Féin, *Westminster Election Manifesto* (1997) 1.

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- <sup>16</sup> Democratic Unionist Party, *Westminster Election Manifesto* (1997) 4.
- <sup>17</sup> The Northern Ireland Executive was formally given devolved power from Westminster in early December 1999. The Assembly was temporarily suspended in February 2000 for just over three months in an attempt by the British Secretary of State to break the stalemate over decommissioning. This was the first of four such suspensions – the most recent of which lasted from October 2002 until the restoration of devolution in May 2007 following agreement between Sinn Féin and the DUP to share power.
- <sup>18</sup> James Tilley, Geoffrey Evans and Claire Mitchell ‘Consociationalism and the Evolution of Political Cleavages in Northern Ireland, 1989–2004’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 38.4 (2008): 699–717.
- <sup>19</sup> Sinn Féin, *Assembly Election Manifesto* (2003) 16.
- <sup>20</sup> UUP, *Westminster Election Manifesto* (2005) 1. It is interesting that the UUP presents this objective as still far from being attained, which implies an enduring sense of insecurity vis-à-vis the Union.
- <sup>21</sup> DUP, *Assembly Election Manifesto* (2007) 10.
- <sup>22</sup> Sinn Féin, *Assembly Election Manifesto* (2007) 11.
- <sup>23</sup> UUP, *Assembly Election Manifesto* (2007) 4.
- <sup>24</sup> UUP, *Assembly Election Manifesto* (2011) 38.
- <sup>25</sup> Katy Hayward, ‘Convergence/Divergence: Party political discourse in Northern Ireland’s transition from conflict’, *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 4.3 (2011) 196-213.
- <sup>26</sup> SDLP, *Your Future, Our Priority – Making Devolution Work* (2009) 19.
- <sup>27</sup> UUP (2011) 13, 31.
- <sup>28</sup> Sinn Féin, *Westminster Election Manifesto* (2010) 20.
- <sup>29</sup> Sinn Féin (2010) 4-5, 20.
- <sup>30</sup> DUP, *Assembly Election Manifesto: ‘Moving Forward’* (2011) 6.
- <sup>31</sup> Alliance Party, *Westminster Election Manifesto* (2010) 1.
- <sup>32</sup> *A Shared Future - Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Community Relations Unit, Office of the First and Deputy First Minister, March 2005), web, 18 November 2011 <<http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/asharedfuturepolicy2005.pdf>>.
- <sup>33</sup> Paul Murphy (Secretary of State for Northern Ireland), ‘Foreword’, *A Shared Future*, 3.
- <sup>34</sup> Brian Graham and Catherine Nash, ‘A Shared Future: Territoriality, Pluralism and Public Policy in Northern Ireland’, *Political Geography*, 25.3 (2006) 276.
- <sup>35</sup> Milena Komarova, ‘*You have a Future in this Society!*’: *Discourses on peace-building in Northern Ireland*, Unpublished PhD thesis (Queen’s University Belfast, 2007).
- <sup>36</sup> Northern Ireland Executive, *Programme for Government 2008-2011* (2007), web, 18 November 2011, <<http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/pfgfinal.pdf>>.
- <sup>37</sup> *Programme for Government*, 6.
- <sup>38</sup> *Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* (Belfast: OFMDFM, July 2010), web, 18 November 2011, <[http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/reformatted\\_final\\_print\\_version\\_csi\\_-\\_26.07.10.pdf](http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/reformatted_final_print_version_csi_-_26.07.10.pdf)>.
- <sup>39</sup> *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration*, 44.
- <sup>40</sup> Jennifer Todd and Joseph Ruane, *From ‘A Shared Future’ to ‘Cohesion, Sharing and Integration’ An Analysis of Northern Ireland’s Policy Framework Documents* (Dublin: Institute for British-Irish Studies, UCD, October 2010), web, 18 November 2011, <<http://www.jrct.org.uk/core/documents/download.asp?id=429>>, 3, 13-16.
- <sup>41</sup> Joanne Wallace, *Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration: Consultation Analysis* (Belfast: Wallace Consulting, January 2011), web, 18 November 2011, <[http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/final\\_web\\_version\\_-\\_csi\\_analysis\\_report\\_-\\_pdf\\_1.12\\_mb\\_.pdf](http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/final_web_version_-_csi_analysis_report_-_pdf_1.12_mb_.pdf)>, 5-8.
- <sup>42</sup> UUP (2011) 31. (Notably this document, and the OFMDFM response, was not made publically available until October 2011, a week after it was leaked to the *Irish News*).
- <sup>43</sup> For example: ‘We do not accept the charge that we are prone to shy away from difficult decisions or issues. The Executive has given strong and united leadership through difficult recent circumstances brought about by the economic downturn and by those who would seek to undermine the peace process ... We would also point out that the CSI [Cohesion, Sharing and Integration] programme is about relationships between people, so there must be an element of what people can do

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for themselves, and alongside [sic] government actions, to improve situations'. OFMDFM, *Response to the Consultation on the Draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* (Belfast: OFMDFM, July 2011), web, 18 November 2011,

<[http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/ofmdfm\\_response\\_to\\_csi\\_consultation](http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/ofmdfm_response_to_csi_consultation)>, 5-6.

<sup>44</sup> *Response to the Consultation*, 19.

<sup>45</sup> *Response to the Consultation*, 20.

<sup>46</sup> Information taken from Minister John O'Dowd's answer to question AQO 609/11-15, *Official Report of Northern Ireland Assembly Debates*, 24 October 2011, 68.1, 34, web, 10 December 2011, <<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/Official%20Reports/Plenary/2011/111024.pdf>>. Perhaps non-coincidentally, the working group was first convened only a week after the matter was raised in a tense discussion in the Northern Ireland Assembly (*Official Report of Northern Ireland Assembly Debates*, 20 September 2011, 66.4, 213-214, web, 10 December 2011,

<<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/Official%20Reports/Plenary/2011/110920.pdf>>).

<sup>47</sup> DUP Minister Jonathan Bell's response to John McAllister's question was, 'I think that the paucity of the Member's question is reflected in the fact that he has to go back to a previous century, but then maybe that is where his party actually is.' He later commented, 'The community folks are well ahead of your simple point scoring'. *Official Report of Northern Ireland Assembly Debates*, 14 November 2011, 68.5, 276-77, web, 10 December 2011,

<<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/Official%20Reports/Plenary/2011/111114.pdf>>.

<sup>48</sup> Yet the First Minister, apparently without irony, referred to OFMDFM's response to the *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* consultation exercise as evidence that 'we take very seriously the views that come in' from consultations. See *Official Report of Northern Ireland Assembly Debates*, 12 December 2011, 70.1, 34-35, web, 20 December 2011,

<<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/Official%20Reports/Plenary/2011/20111212.pdf>>.

<sup>49</sup> Brummett, 289.

<sup>50</sup> Youth Initiatives, quoted in Wallace, 47.

<sup>51</sup> These interviews were conducted as part of a joint research project on the *Agreement Generation*, led by Aoibhín de Búrca, a recipient of an *Ad Astra* research scholarship at the John Hume Institute for Global Irish Studies, University College Dublin. I wish to express my sincerest thanks to Aoibhín for allowing me to use some of the data produced in our project in this paper.

<sup>52</sup> All our respondents were born in the late 1980s and were at primary school at the time of the multi-party talks and 1998 Agreement.

<sup>53</sup> Focus group interview [interviewer Aoibhín de Búrca], *Agreement Generation* project research (Belfast, 2 November 2011). All subsequent quotations in this section are taken from this focus group.

<sup>54</sup> All quotations in this section have been from *Agreement Generation* focus group, 2 November 2011.

<sup>55</sup> UUP (2011), 31.